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PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF TEACHER EDUCATION

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The preparation of teachers, earnest enterprise though it is, is fraught with inadequacies. Many of these stem from the ill-defined nature of the enterprise itself. The goal of getting fledgling teachers into the classroom has taken many guises over the years, as befits an enterprise somewhat uncertain of its direction and goals. Courses of teacher education have got longer and the experiences contained within them more varied and academic. The spoils of educational science, if 'science' is the right word, are ever more marshalled into the service of teacher training, with the natural expectation that teachers will be better for them. Yet though this 'science' is proudly advertised as a sound basis for practice, the spectre of classroom reality frequently tells teachers otherwise. The regular gripe is that, contrary to all the propaganda, educational theory either speaks to a world of pedagogic fantasy or supplies such an adamant critique of classrooms and schools that any teacher (would-be or otherwise) whose scruples are not compromised by the need for security, would surely want to reconsider his or her decision to be such.

Teacher educators are, of course, well aware that educational science suffers from a somewhat diminished credibility. They are usually the first to admit that the calculus of its utility is fairly low and that there is no coherent theory of teaching which could act as an adequate grounding for those entering teaching for the first time (Dorio, 1982; Taylor, 1983; Symes, 1983; Fuller and Brown, 1975). They have confessed this on innumerable occasions, and have put much thought into rethinking the curriculum of teacher education.¹ The upshot of all this self-examination has been a re-endorsement of the need for a marriage between theory and practice, plus some suggestions on how the two might be melded together in a more satisfactory fashion. The vogue for school-based teacher

1. The profusion of government reports on teacher education, both in Australia and the United Kingdom, is indicative of this. Student teachers must be the most over-investigated academic creatures in the whole 'zoo' of higher education.

education and various styles of internship represent obvious attempts to bridge the theory/practice split (Bone, 1980). But whilst teaching training *in situ* has very obvious virtues, it could easily concentrate the teacher's attention on the tricks of the pedagogic trade at the expense of considering more general questions about education and schooling. To treat the art of teaching as if it were an utterly 'autotelic' enterprise, having little to do with the world beyond the classroom, smacks of the spurious. Teachers, whether they are aware of it or not, are the vessels through which much political and social philosophy flows. Their acts in the classroom cannot be isolated from broader questions of social justice and the matter of what, in the best possible of worlds, would constitute a just education for the individual. The practitioner of teaching needs to be more informed than ever about how it is that the school, and the activities which go on therein, are instrumental in the reproduction of the social and cultural order. Anything less and the processes of teaching are trivialised. Only if the practices of teaching are considered alongside the broader societal issues can teachers ultimately hope to make any inroads into the problems growing apace in the classroom. The trouble is that teachers are frequently their own worst enemies where this is concerned. For whilst they themselves retain an inchoate (and often, very incorrigible) sense of what schools are about, the old myths about education and pupils will continue to be perpetuated. This is where the 'personal construct theory', which Fielding has adopted in connection with teacher development, offers decided possibilities.

The problem with most teacher education programmes, be they school- or discipline-based, is that they frequently eschew the 'human factor' in teaching. Most such programmes, for example, assume a standard clientele, who are expected to complete their *rites de passages* into teaching in a specified time. The content of teacher education is also relatively prescribed along the lines described earlier. It is automatically assumed that all novitiate teachers, irrespective of their age and background, will need so many units of psychology and sociology, to be studied to an optimum level of academic expertise, if they are to make satisfactory teachers. Fielding's model of teacher development is a refreshing attempt to overthrow some of these traditional assumptions. For one thing, its very psychological orientation serves to re-emphasise those human factors heretofore mentioned as being underrated in teacher education. Teaching, above all, is a person-to-person enterprise, in which the quality of inter-communication figures large in the effectiveness of classroom practice. If there has been a mistake in the past, where the planning of teacher

education programmes is concerned, it is that it has often overlooked this fact. Student teachers have been expected to fit into pre-designed programmes, with very little thought being given to what is a **fait accompli**: that each student teacher comes to these programmes with different background experiences and ideas about teaching, not to say very different needs as well. When much teacher education enjoins its students to consider the virtues of child-centred learning and individualised instruction, it is somewhat ironic that teacher education is itself rarely student-centred. Fielding's model, confessedly anti-functionalist in tenor, represents a step towards a more personalised form of teacher education, in which the student seemingly has the freedom to develop at his or her own pace, unchecked by the institutional imperatives that currently govern such education. It remains of course to be seen how academic institutions and State departments of education, given their well-known intransigence, would react to proposals which have the potential to upset the regular career rhythms of teachers.

In line with Fielding's attempt to free up the processes of teacher education, to make them more individualised in orientation, is his application of 'personal construct theory'. His notion of 'role integration' derives from Kelly (1963), as does his concept of self. In what appears to be at first sight a rather phenomenological account of the self,² Kelly makes the assumption that each person responds to the world in a wholly unique, though not arbitrary fashion. Via the mediating influence of so-called 'constructs', the world is construed variously, according to one's immediate state of mind and mood or the preponderance of experiences which have gone to make up one's biography to date, a construct, in this context, being a mechanism by which individuals venture to make predictions and hypotheses about their immediate circumstances and world (Kelly, 1970; Bannister and Fransella, 1971). It is a major theme of living, says Kelly (1963), that the individual is ever engaged in the manufacture of quasi-scientific theories, against which to measure the behaviour and conduct of the world. The rhythm of 'confirmation and disconfirmation' of these theories, suggests Kelly (1970), is a vital adjunct of consciousness. Without it, our rapport with the world would collapse into chaos and disorder.

2. There are also parallels between Kelly's work and the account of consciousness recently offered by Popper and Eccles (1977). However, unlike Kelly, Popper and Eccles stress the importance of what they call World Three — the domain of knowledge and learning — in the formation of an individual's outlook on the world.

Though Kelly never mentions it, presumably teaching would be just one domain of consciousness in which the individual employs constructs to make sense of his or her situation. After all, no act of teaching, even though it may sometimes look like it, is entirely gratuitous. Behind each teacher's pedagogic style lies a host of educational principles upon which classroom practice is contingent. More to the point, teachers often bring to the classroom a set of constructs (often of long standing) which predispose their judgements to certain types of pupils (Ryan, 1972; Rosenthal and Jackson, 1968). Nor need we end at the teachers; for pupils and parents also bring their own set of constructs to bear on the school situation. The interpretation of pedagogic circumstances, in other words, is hardly ever neutral; but is accompanied by a whole gamut of predispositions, which may or may not colour and distort the way these circumstances are finally interpreted. Of course, whether teachers (let alone parents and pupils) are finally aware of the constructs upon which their actions are based, is a moot point. In a way which Fielding has not mentioned, it is here that personal construct theory offers immense scope. For, in freely acknowledging the subjective elements in the interpretation of one's circumstances, it offers a mechanism (namely 'repertory grid technique') by which the constructs governing those interpretations can be elicited from the individual. But more than just this, the employment of this technique can also show to an individual how particular circumstances can serve to transform or modulate the import of a given construct. Subtle variations in one's personal circumstances, it seems, can have a great deal of weight in determining how one ultimately beholds a given pedagogic situation (Pope and Keen, 1981). After all, if a bout of personal stress can transform an ordinarily kind and compassionate teacher into a savage and unrepentant martinet, as it seems it can, the teacher involved needs to be aware of this possibility as he or she is of the theories of Piaget or the latest neo-Marxist ethnographer to have come on the scene. Teachers, after all, are not just the executants of educational theory and pedagogic technique; they are also human beings (*sic*), and as such are as subject to the same traps of tension and anxiety as anyone else. Understanding how and why a particular side of one's pedagogic personality might show itself on some occasions and not on others, might be as valuable a lesson in learning how to teach as many a conventional lesson in the psychology of teaching.

The second half of Fielding's paper concerns itself with delineating the stages of teacher development; it deals with the matter of how the metamorphoses from student to teacher, from teacher to educational theorist

actually occur. Allegedly, this is supposed to act as a 'basis for a descriptive model of the process of learning how to teach and becoming a teacher', an ambitious goal to say the least. As it turns out, Fielding's paper is concerned much more with the processes of 'becoming a teacher' than with the more difficult issue of how it is teachers actually learn to teach. Implicit in the model is the assumption that teachers pass through a number of critical stages in their careers. As Fielding enumerates these, they occur at a number of nodal points on an institutional continuum which starts at school and ends at university. Thus, would-be teachers begin their careers as students at school, go on to continue with their studentships at university, and then return to schools as teachers. Later on in their careers, some of these self-same teachers might, after higher degree studies in education, eventually find themselves back at university as educational theorists.³ Fielding's thesis is that the transition from educational institution to educational institution, and from career stage to career stage, will require extensive role modification and construct reappraisal. That might sound like stating the obvious, and it might well be that; but it is something which is constantly overlooked in teacher education programmes. To reiterate an earlier point, there is a lot of the 'human being' in a teacher. Educational theory and knowledge expertise are but one element of being in front of a class, and unless they are transmuted into an appropriate pedagogic personality, they will be little short of useless. Teachers are made, **not** born, and that making might well involve going against certain deeply saturated predispositions of the individual, a not easy task in anyone's life, let alone a twenty-year-old-fresh from university.

Of course all this raises the questions of just how it is students *qua* persons actually select themselves into the role of teaching: an important issue, but one which is not addressed in Fielding's paper. An obvious rejoinder to the question is that in the main 'teachers' are initially selected for the role, meaning that those students without requisite academic qualifications never get near the classroom. It is worth asking the question of whether this is just or not, and whether there really is a correlation between high academic qualifications and good teaching performance.

3. A notable shortcoming of Fielding's model is that it does not give an adequate enough account of what is an increasing occurrence these days, and that is the phenomenon of in-service education. More and more teachers are taking out higher degrees which are, of course, *de rigueur* for the teacher who has academic aspirations.

The developmental model that Fielding has espoused⁴ assumes, rightly or wrongly, that university is *sine qua non* where teaching is concerned. This might be because teaching has increasingly become associated with specialised knowledge and levels of expertise which can only be acquired in tertiary institutions like universities. Yet it has to be pointed out that there is nothing particularly special or shibboleth-like about teaching; it is, in fact, an activity regularly engaged in everyday life by just about everybody (Hamlyn, 1978; Passmore, 1980). Only an absolute hermit could possibly escape what is a regular obligation in life, required by all sorts of common situations, from directing someone across a city to teaching them the ins and outs of backgammon. Perhaps the only difference⁴ is that teachers teach more often and to more numbers of people at the one go. But whilst teachers are nominally called teachers, teaching of course forms but only a small percentage of the activities in which they are expected to engage (Harris, 1982). If communicating knowledge and learning formed the total ambit of their job, they would have an easy life. Everyone knows (or should know!) that teachers must first set up the circumstances in which to communicate their learning, a not easy task given that many pupils these days are hostile to the idea of a 'little learning'. Fielding is right to insist that the novitiate teacher is primarily concerned with 'survival', and whilst one might baulk at the bellicose overtones in that epithet, the truth of the matter is that teachers increasingly have to deal with refractory students who require the attention of a 'policeman' rather than a scholar. Much of the anxiety of the student and the first-year-out-teacher centres not so much on whether they can teach or not, but whether they can police a class long enough for them to be able to 'teach'. But whilst the novitiate teacher is learning to master the art of coping with a classful of recalcitrant pupils, he or she should be endeavouring to ask the more prior question as to why the pupils were recalcitrant in the first place! For, in the long run, an answer to that question might do more to relieve the embattled teacher than all the tricks of appeasement in the world. This brings the paper back to where it began: with a consideration of how theory might better direct practice. The problem is not that theory is irrelevant or useless; it is just that as the construct of survival and career development assumes more prominence in the teacher's life, it begins to fade into the background. The problem, then, is to keep that theory sufficiently alive in a teacher's outlook for it not to be submerged beneath the exigencies of day-to-day life in the classroom. If construct theory can

4. To give Fielding his due, he does point out that his model of teacher development encompasses academic 'environments generally typical of English-speaking countries' where university-based teacher education is common.

be employed in such a way as to prevent that happening, its use will have been well vindicated.

Fielding's model is one which centres on the induction of students into the teaching service and beyond. That in itself is no small achievement, given that most teacher educationists have interested themselves mainly in the internal dynamics of pre-service training, and have rarely looked at the life of the teacher 'before' and 'after' university. If there is a problem with the model, it is that it concentrates too much on 'teacher development' and rarely touches on the question of how it is the amelioration of such development will result in tangible benefits for classroom practice. No doubt it is at the back of Fielding's mind that if one can improve the psychological climate in which students come to teaching, the other will look after itself. The model also stresses the essential interrelatedness of being a student and a teacher, something which is often forgotten in the mad rush for credentials. Too often we are inclined to forget that to be a good teacher — as the poet Coleridge was fond of pointing out (Walsh, 1966) — one must have first experienced the joys and magic of learning. With its emphasis on students being encouraged to organise their own learning programmes, Fielding's model offers the real possibility of such learning occurring more often in the university setting and, if for no other reason than that, demands further consideration and elaboration.

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